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OLD TRADING FORTS IN SOUTHERN ALBERTA

Sometimes called "Whiskey Forts"

By

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At the time of the coming of the Mounted Police in 1874, the International Boundary south of Macleod was not very well known.

The buffalo country from the Red River to what is Calgary was a No Man's Land, that is, white men would rarely risk their lives in coming through a country infested with so many bands of hostile Indians. It was the hunting ground of many different tribes of both Canadian and American Indians. Neither knew or recognized an International Boundary.

At this time all passengers, freight and mail for Macleod and the West had to come via the United States, Fort Benton on the Missouri River, 200 miles away, was the starting point for the Bull trains that came into Fort Macleod with the goods for trading posts strategically located on Old Man River, Belly River, St. Mary's River and Highwood.

Some of these posts did a fairly straight legal business, but most of them were Whiskey Forts established for the one purpose of trading a poor quality of whiskey for buffalo robes. The order had gone forth in the U.S.A., that the buffalo must be exterminated, because the Indians would not settle on the reserves so long as it were possible to hunt buffalo, on which they could live, as they had hitherto lived.

These forts were generally very substantially built, much

more so than the usual fur trading posts. The treatment accorded the Indians by the American traders was very different to that accorded them at the Hudson's Bay posts.

The fur traders of the North were interested in keeping the Indians alive and healthy so that they might hunt and bring in ample quantities of furs. In years of poor fur catches the fur traders would grub-stake the Indians and tide them over. The fur trader's word was his bond; and the Indians knew he did not speak with a "forked tongue". Consequently it was not necessary to fortify these Northern posts against Indian attack as was the case with the forts in the south.

As already stated, these "Whiskey Forts" were very strongly built, the outside walls being of stockaded logs standing side by side in a ~~trench~~ trench in the ground which was filled in, often rearing sixteen feet above the plain. Even the chimneys had iron bars placed across the top to prevent the Indians entering by that means. At each of the four corners of the stockade there were bastions, or lookouts, where sentries watched for any possible attack after the red men had been debauched with white man's fire-water. And connecting these lookouts was a firing platform all around the enclosure. Only one entrance gave admission, and this was at all times kept strongly barred except when bull teams arrived with goods, or took out shipments of buffalo robes. Beside the entrance gate was a small opening in the logs through which the Indian passed a tightly rolled buffalo robe and received in return a tin cup of watered whiskey. Colonel Steele reported: "A ~~quarter~~ quart of the stuff bought a fine pony."

When the traders had accumulated a sufficient quantity

of robes they shipped them by bull teams to Fort Benton, where the American Government paid the traders three dollars per robe, and sold them privately at eight dollars each. The Mounted Police purchased 105 robes at four dollars and twenty-five cents apiece. Some profit on a few cents worth of watered whiskey!

Conditions obtaining at these "Whiskey Forts" can be gathered from the following letter written by a trader to his friend at Fort Benton:

"Dear Friend:

Bill Gourry got to putting on airs and I shot him, and he is dead. My potatoes are looking fine.

Yours truly,

Skookum Jim."

Probably the largest and most important post was Whoop-up. It was built in 1868 and did a lucrative business until the arrival of the police in 1874, when the post was burned.

"Fort Hamilton" was built by a man described as a "notorious character", one John Healy. The fort was named after the firm of Hamilton, Healey and Company of Fort Benton, Montana, U.S.A., who, it is said, supplied the trading outfits. Colonel Robertson Ross reports: "Here they have about twenty armed men, and have carried on for some time an illegal trade with the Blackfeet Indians, supplying them with rifles, revolvers, good of various kinds, whiskey and other ardent spirits, in direct opposition to the laws of both the United States and the Dominion of Canada, and without paying any customs duties for the goods introduced into the latter country."

"At Fort Edmonton whiskey was sold to Indians by these

traders right at the gate of the fort, and when asked if they did not know it was illegal they answered 'Yes!'; but there was no force there to prevent them, and they would do as they pleased."

Fort Hamilton is not often spoken of by the writers; Whoop-up seems to have become the name of a place or district, and as Fort Hamilton was built some three hundred yards away Hamilton was referred to generally as Whoop-up.

Fort Whoop-up was built in 1868 by a carpenter named Bill Gladstone for Hamilton and Healey of Fort Benton, who, in turn, were backed by Powers and Company, and others. In the form of a square three hundred yards either way it took two years to construct. After Hamilton and Healey made a small fortune in the whiskey trade the fort was turned over to Akers.

Whoop-up was thirty miles from Fort Macleod, while Fort Walsh was a hundred and fifty miles to the eastward. Belly River was the old name of the river, it being later changed to Old Man River.

There were a few legitimate American traders in the country who traded guns, ammunition and goods for buffalo robes. The whiskey traders objected, and organized the so-called "Spitzee Cavalry", named after the river of that name, now known as High River, Alberta. Spitzee, of course, means tall timber, and the river was often called the Highwood. These people ran some of the legitimate traders out of the country and helped protect the outlaws.

In 1872 a party, most of whom had participated in the Civil War, came from Fort Benton to the Cypress Hills forty miles north of the border, near where Fort Walsh was later built. These

men traded large quantities of whiskey to a band of Assinaboine Indians encamped along the creek on a flat piece of prairie now known as "The Massacre Ground".

When night came these fiends in human shape decided to clean out the Indian camp and posted themselves on a cutbank on the south side of the creek. Here they could stand on the gravel breast-high, rest their Winchesters on top, and fire from good cover. The Indians were in the midst of their orgy, every lodge lighted up so that a good view of each could be had. Fire was then opened with the result that over thirty of the Indians were killed, many were wounded, and the rest, not knowing where their assailants were, fled to the hills for refuge.

This massacre was seen by Abe Farwell, a respectable American trader who had a post nearby, and who was married to Big Mary, a Crow woman. After the Indians had fled the ruffians made prisoner a young squaw who'd crossed the creek to take refuge at the Farwell's and were in the act of carrying her off when Big Mary appeared wrathfully upon the scene, covering them with a revolver. Backed up by Abe she dragged the girl from them and took her to their post. The report of this massacre eventually led to the organization of the North West Mounted Police.

Colonel Steele wrote:"That only the traveller who courted death went west of where Pile of Bones - Regina - now stands". Even the whiskey traders could not have established themselves in the Blackfoot country had they not been led by bold outlaws who knew war and palisaded themselves strongly.

The Indians burned the Hudson's Bay post on the Bow River called "Old Bow Fort", also Chesterfield House, built at a cost of

two hundred thousand dollars below the confluence of the south Saskatchewan and Red Deer rivers.

The murders, massacres and outrages by the Indians on each other, and on the whites, would take many pages to tell, but the cause of it all can be said in that single word "Whiskey".

The arrival of the Shimarganishuk, the Mounted Police, in the West in a short time established law and order, and the outlaw "whiskey forts" soon became a thing of the past.